Catamaran Crossing

A Sailing Adventure

from

La Coruña to Antigua

Douglas Carl Fricke

Catamaran Crossing: 1st Place Award

in Non-fiction, Travel Adventure Category

"Mr. Fricke has crafted a fascinating true-life tale that reads like a narrative work of fiction, and as such has all of the adventure, description, and immersive techniques that fiction writers use to pull us into the story."

K.C. Finn for Readers' Favorite

"An accomplished, knowledgeable sailor himself, Fricke's writing style is crisp, and the narrative is interesting and easy to follow."

Andrew at Jalbert Productions

"Informative and educational, it is only fitting that this is as good a quality of penmanship that you will see on the subject; and, the endorsement of John Shuttleworth is as good a reference as any."

Matt McAvoy, Senior Editor MJV Literary

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Dreams of sailing the ocean blue sometimes come true.

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For Captain Ted and Joni

Contents

Foreword by John Shuttleworth 7
Introduction 9
Opportunity Knocks 11
The Planning Stage 19
The Canary Islands 30
Detour to La Coruña, Spain 41
Decisions, Decisions 47
The Canary Current 58
Riding the Storm 70
Provisioning in the Canaries 85
The Real Club Náutico de Tenerife 101
Day 1: Say Good-bye to Santa Cruz 106
Day 2: Tropic of Cancer 114
Day 4: Migrant Swallow 117
Day 6: The Skipjack Tuna 121
Day 7: The Doldrums 125
Day 9: Flying Fish Contest 131
Day 10: Visitors 134
Day 12: Late-Night Flashback 140
Day 13: Sextant vs SatNav 145
Day 16: Land Ho! 154

Epilogue 166
About the Author 167
Acknowledgements 168

Photo: The Catamaran *Toucan* 10
Map: The Canary Islands, (Wikimedia Commons) 29
Map: Bay of Biscay, (Wikimedia Commons) 37
Artwork: *La naissance du catamaran* by Jean-Olivier Héro 40
Photo: Tower of Hércules 44
Schematic: Shuttleworth Design, *Spectrum-42* 50
Photo: Main salon on starboard 53
Photo: *Toucan's* spinnaker, photo by Joni 63
Quote: Tristan Jones, *The Incredible Voyage*, 1977 70
Photo: *Toucan's* winch farm, photo by Joni 91
Photo: First mate Joni in the galley 98
Artwork: The Flammarion Engraving 113
Quote: Jack London, *The Sea-Wolf*, 1904 117
Photo: Three sailors weighing the tuna, photo by Joni 124
Quote: Joseph Campbell, *Reflections on the Art of Living* 125
Quote: Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952 131
Illustration: Sextant (Wikimedia Commons) 145
Quote: Pythagoras, *The Symbols*, "Symbol 8" 145
Photo: English Harbour, Antigua (Wikimedia Commons) 165
Photo: The author on board *Toucan*, 1994, photo by Joni 167

Foreword by John Shuttleworth

I have been privileged to know many fine people who were or still are owners of my designs. A keen sailor myself, it was always important to me that my boats were used and loved by their owners. My passion for the sea and yacht design was expressed not just by the craft I was fortunate enough to create, but through the owners and their friends and families who enjoyed their vessels, and the fantastic experience of sailing a well-found yacht on the ocean.

When Ted invited me to sail with him and his crew from La Coruña to the Canaries in the summer of 1986, I leapt at the chance. I had met Doug, Ted and Joni and really got on well with them. We all seemed to share a zany sense of humour, and I knew we were in for a fun social time as well as an adventure. The way the crew bonds together is particularly important if you are going to enjoy living in a small space for a week or so, and more so if the going gets rough.

Doug's story of the voyage we did together and the subsequent Atlantic crossing makes fun reading, and he adds in enough technical detail to explain some of the things that sailors need to know to safely attempt to go to sea in a small sailing yacht. Of course, the trip was more than having fun for me. Evaluating and experiencing my designs at sea and in difficult conditions has always been an integral part of my approach to design.

The last time I saw Ted, Joni, and Doug was when we met at Ted's house in Florida, where he has his stunning saltwater fish tanks, and watched the extremely funny video of the trip, ate a wonderful dinner together, and parted friends for life!

All the best,
John Shuttleworth
www.ShuttleworthDesign.com

Introduction

It sounds like a simple plan:

- Take a three-week vacation in the summer.
- Fly to the Canary Islands and meet up with friends.
- Help sail their new catamaran across the Atlantic.

The vacation needs to be extended. Meeting up with friends turns out to be not so simple. And the last part of the plan…

Jump back to the 1980s, before the internet and cell phones, back when offshore cruising catamarans were coming of age and join us as we sail from La Coruña in northwest Spain to Antigua in the West Indies.

The islands, the cities, the yacht clubs, and the creatures are real, except for the mermaids. Mr. Shuttleworth, the man who designed the 42' catamaran *Toucan,* allowed the use of his real name, but the names of the other characters have been disguised for privacy reasons.

By convention, the names of the stars, the planets, the moons, the constellations, and the meteor showers have been capitalized. And following NASA's lead, the same is true for every reference to the Sun star and the Moon.

May you find our adventure story entertaining and informative.

The 42' Shuttleworth catamaran *Toucan* in the Bay of Biscay, May 1986

Opportunity Knocks

The anchor and chain are stashed in the locker, the mainsail is trimmed tight, and the large genoa sail is folded on deck, ready to hoist. It's a cloudless Saturday morning during the first week in May, the temperature hangs in the low eighties. A gentle breeze fills in from the northwest, excellent for sailing.

After enduring another five days of rest and recuperation in the office cubicle, this weekend warrior is back on the water. Alone in the cockpit, I motor-sail the trimaran out the channel into the Gulf of Mexico, shut off the engine, and hoist the genoa sharply. I grab the helm again and turn the bow off the wind. The warm air rushes through the slot between the sails and lifts the boat across the water.

With the tiller braced to steer a straight course, I climb down below for a few seconds to grab a bottle of water and my sunglasses. Back in the cockpit, feet up on the bench, I free the tiller and head up closer to the wind. It's times like this when one of my dear fantasies kicks in. Sell the house, the furniture, the Ford Ranchero, and quit my job. Broaden my horizons beyond Florida's Suncoast and sail away to the Caribbean. But I can't quite make the break. My little world won't let me go.

***

Six days later, it's a slow Friday at the office. I slip out early, stop by the house to change into casual attire, then drive south to the causeway. The wind funnels around the pillars of condo towers and

ripples the surface of Boca Ciega Bay where a dozen small sailboats are racing, jockeying toward the favored end of the starting line. If the weather is like this tomorrow, I'm going sailing again.

The city of St. Petersburg on the Gulf Coast of Florida is surrounded on three sides by water and has more than its share of bridges. All along the waterfront, marinas and yacht clubs cater to the needs of an oversized boating community. Members of our sailing club have visited every yacht club and squadron in the bay area, most often to compete in a regatta.

Up ahead there's one more bridge to cross and I'll be on time for the dinner party. Too late, horns begin blaring and yellow caution lights flash. The gates come down across both lanes and the iron grate roadway of the bascule bridge rises over the Intracoastal Waterway. The cars in front of me slow to a stop.

Stuck in traffic, I turn the radio on hoping to hear a favorite tune. Instead, a news broadcaster blabbers about First Lady Nancy Reagan's new "Just Say No" drug awareness campaign. Another station replays some asinine commercial about the new improved something or other. That's enough. I switch it back off.

It doesn't seem fair that ten or more cars have to wait on both sides of the bridge for one sailboat to pass, especially during the Friday afternoon rush hour. Whenever this topic comes up at the sailing squadron, the old-timers remind us that the waterway was there long before the road.

On the far south side of the city, not too long ago, only Mother Nature lived on the mangrove barrier islands. Today in that same area,

called Tierra Verde, multistory dwellings are being built several feet above sea level along dredged canals. The newest structures have living spaces above the ground floor in preparation for the inevitable high water. Two of my sailing friends, Ted and his wife Joni, prefer the community because the canals provide access to the Gulf and to Tampa Bay without being blocked in by bridges.

The gates go up, and the traffic rushes across the bridge into the neighborhood. A sneaky cop in an unmarked vehicle selects my ugly Ranchero for some crazy reason and pulls me over.

"In a hurry?" asks the officer standing at the window.

"Yes, sir." With my driver's license and vehicle registration card ready, I hand 'em over for inspection.

Now I'm definitely late for dinner.

The officer flips the shades up on his glasses and reads my name on the license. "Is it pronounced Frick or Frickey?"

"It rhymes with tricky." Call me whatever you want, just hurry up. "But some of my old friends call me Frick."

"Okay, Mr. Fricke. I'm giving you a warning today." He hands my IDs back. "Keep it under thirty-five on this side of the bridge."

Whew! Got lucky.

***

Parked at the curb in front of the house, I get out carrying a full six-pack. Most other days, one of the bottles would have already been opened. On the front porch, Ted is waiting in the doorway. At six-four, the older man stands about a head taller than me and could easily crush

some bones with a firm handshake. He doesn't and probably never would.

"I'm a little late. Got stopped at the bridge and a cop pulled me over for speeding."

Ted glances at the old Ranchero. "Damn, I should have warned you about the speed trap."

"Lucky me, it was just a warning ticket."

"Good, come on in."

Once inside the double wooden doors and through the foyer, we enter a vaulted living space two stories tall. The ceiling slants toward the far wall of windows which offers a view of the canal. Artwork acquired during a visit to the American Southwest graces the walls and shelves. Handwoven Navajo rugs and blankets are scattered about.

When Joni sees us, she shuts off the faucet and dries her hands. She greets me with her usual sisterly hug and takes the six-pack. "There's still two cold ones in the fridge from the last time."

"I'll trade you for one of 'em."

Fesser, their pet cockatiel, takes off and flies around the vaulted room. While we watch the confined aerobatics, another bird screeches from its cage. It's a white, sulphur-crested cockatoo, probably jealous of Fesser whose wings aren't clipped. Whatever, Joni pulls the cover over Sugar's cage and the piercing cries stop.

"This bird could live another forty years." Her tone sounds like a complaint, but it's no secret, Joni loves her pets. She’s the outdoorsy type and watches for hours sometimes to get the perfect zoomed-in photo of a feathered friend in Fort De Soto Park. In the heat of the day,

she'll tuck her chestnut brown hair under a wide-brim sun hat, but I've never seen her tie it in a ponytail.

Ted picks up his drink and walks away. "There's a cockatoo over fifty years old up north in a Chicago zoo."

As we follow Ted into the living room, Fesser the cockatiel lands on Joni's shoulder.

Being a handyman, Ted recently built a saltwater aquarium in one of the living room walls so that it can be viewed from two sides. He ran the wiring and plumbing, cleverly hidden in the wall, through the floorboards into his workshop on the lower level, which is stocked with every imaginable household tool.

The last time I was here the aquarium was filled with colorful tropical fish brought back from dive trips to the Florida Keys but this time the tank appears empty until something slithers slowly up the glass. The creature blends perfectly with its surroundings, making it hard to identify, but then a row of light-colored suckers on the underside of a coiled tentacle gives it away.

"You've got an octopus!"

"Kinda hard to see, isn't he?" Joni rubs her hand on the glass. "We named him Penner, our friendly little *octopus vulgaris.*"

Ted slides the heavy top of the tank off to the side. "We found him on a dive trip out in the Gulf. Actually, he found us. Go ahead, put your hand in the tank."

Yeah, right. Each tentacle is about the same thickness as my forefinger but much longer. Joni offers no encouragement, no warning. She just smiles. The cockatiel bobs his head back and forth.

"I might put my hand in after you demonstrate how it's done."

"Okay, watch." Ted lowers his right hand into the tank and the octopus curls one of its tentacles around a finger. The creature reaches for another finger, but as Ted slowly raises his hand out of the water, the octopus releases its grip.

"Put your hand in so you can feel its strength," says Ted. "And don't jerk it out because you could rip off some of its suckers."

I place my empty beer bottle on the shelf, lift my arm, and dip my hand in the saltwater. The little octopus holds tight to the side of the tank with six or seven tentacles, wraps another one around my finger, and squeezes. Following Ted's lead, I pull my hand away slowly and overpower little Penner.

"He sure has a strong grip. Let's hope we never have to tangle with his big brother in the wild." I wipe my hand on the seat of my pants, retrieve the beer bottle, and point toward the tank. "It's clever the way you built it into the wall."

"Thanks." Ted slides the top back on the aquarium and places a brick in the middle to secure it. "I'll show you the filtering system later."

Joni leads the way back to the kitchen past the windows facing the canal. A snowy egret stands steadfast on the seawall staring into the water, feathers reflecting pink from the red sky at sunset.

"Where's your sailboat?"

"We sold it." Ted swirls the ice cubes in his glass. "We're having a new one built in southern England."

"You're kidding me."

Joni fills her glass and freshens Ted's drink. She pulls the other cold bottle of Beck's from the fridge and hands it to me. An itchy sensation lingers in my finger. Must be octopus withdrawals. We join Ted at the counter which separates the kitchen from the living room.

"Why did you decide to have the boat built in England?"

"We selected a design by John Shuttleworth, who lives on the Isle of Wight," says Ted. "He recommended a builder close by, so he could supervise the construction and check on the progress."

Well-known in the world of offshore multihulled sailboats, Shuttleworth routinely publishes articles in *Multihulls Magazine* discussing the benefits of a well-designed catamaran while sometimes referring to his boat building plans.

"Good move. I've read several sailing articles by Shuttleworth. He's definitely ahead of the competition."

Ted clears his throat. "It's a catamaran, a *Spectrum-42* design."

Wow! Adding a Shuttleworth catamaran to the club fleet will be exciting news for the members. Before I can say anything, Joni launches Fesser off her finger and turns toward me.

"Plus, during construction Ted and I can do some sightseeing in southern England and visit the boatyard all in one trip."

"The deciding factor, though, was the favorable exchange rate." Ted takes a sip of his drink. "The dollar is much stronger in Europe these days."

What would I say if they asked me to help with the delivery? The *Spectrum-42* is four feet longer than my Newick trimaran and will easily accommodate five sailors.

Fesser finishes another flight around the room and lands on the back of an empty bar stool. Ted whistles a melody, and the bird repeats it almost exactly. Joni looks amused then Ted continues talking about the boat deal. All the while, I keep wondering what it would be like to sail from England to Florida.

The cockatiel easily makes the jump to Ted's shoulder and quick as a wink, an image flashes before my eyes—a pirate with a parrot. Turning on my stool, I glance at the bird, then at Ted. "Are you gonna sail it across or have it delivered?"

"I planned to have it delivered but Joni keeps talking about sailing it across ourselves."

I have dreamed of sailing west from St. Pete straight across the Gulf of Mexico to Corpus Christi, Texas or maybe heading south into the Caribbean, but not across the ocean. The biggest hurdle has been finding a compatible mix of experienced crew. Sailing with Ted and Joni on the Gulf Coast of Florida, in their boat or mine, has always been a delight—compatibility being the least of our concerns.

"That's right." Joni looks excited and profoundly serious. "We could sail it back if you'd go with us."

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Opportunity of a lifetime.

Can't be. Opportunity doesn't knock twice.

After enjoying another one of Joni's baked fish dinners with steamed veggies, we sit around the dining room table and talk for hours. Are we really thinking about sailing across the ocean?

The Planning Stage

Crossing the Atlantic will be the longest sailing voyage any of us have ever taken, and preparations will require far more planning than we needed for our quick jaunts up and down the west coast of Florida.

Not going sailing today, I've got groundwork to do. It starts with a visit to the card catalog in the branch library on Fifth Avenue. Two of the books that sound promising are sitting on the shelf in the right spot. The librarian says she can requisition the others from the main library and have them available for pick-up by Monday afternoon.

"By Monday? Thanks anyway. I'll drive downtown right now."

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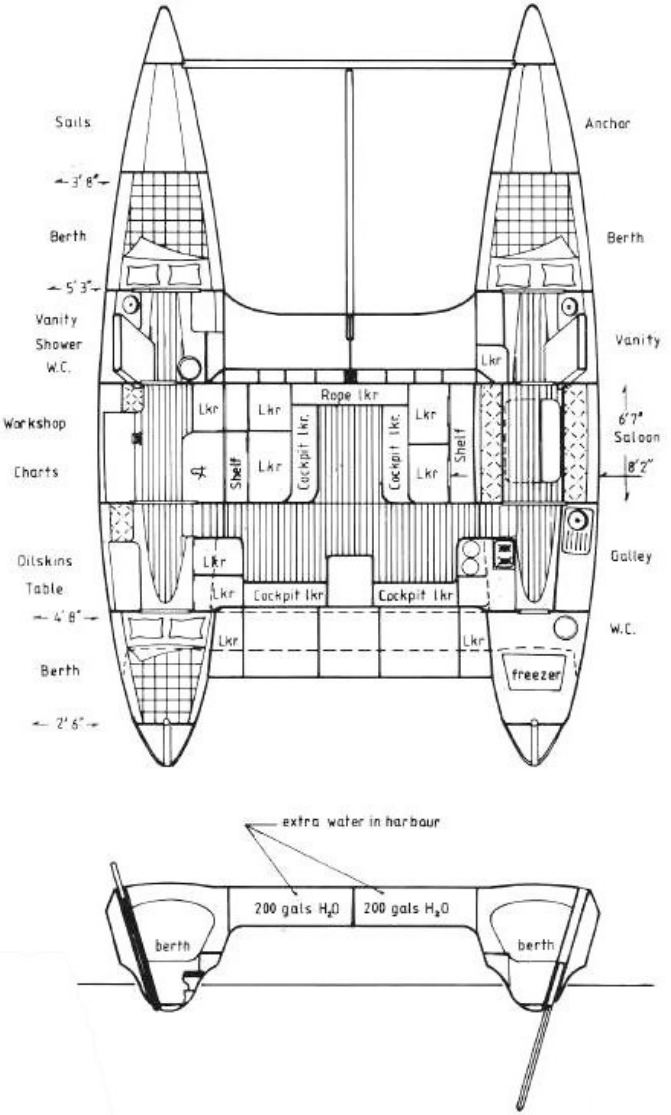
Shuttleworth Design, Spectrum-42



Spectrum-42 main salon on starboard, looking forward from the galley

Day 6: The Skipjack Tuna

Puffy white clouds like cotton balls hover in the afternoon sky and cast shadows on the surface of the sea. As we sail in and out of the shady spots, the spinnaker shivers in the breeze.

Ted puts down his paperback and stretches his muscles. He checks his wristwatch and glances astern at the boat's wake because the magic feeding hours at dusk are approaching. If we sail too fast, his fishing lure will skip across the surface. Sail too slow and the lure will sink. *Toucan's* speed is exactly right.

Always willing to lend a hand, I remove my headphones and watch as he retrieves his tackle box from the locker under the bench.

"You gonna try your luck?"

Ted rummages through the box. "Yeah, let's see what happens."

He prefers high-test monofilament fishing line and always gives his flashy silver spoon lots of it, so the lure will ride far behind the boat's foamy wake where the curious fish can see it. His fishing pole, when not in use, stays tied to the handholds mounted in the ceiling across from the nav station.

"I'll get your pole."

"Grab a couple pieces of nylon ties while you're down there."

The pole has a proper casting reel, but instead of casting, Ted simply lets enough line pay out and ties the pole horizontally along the rear crossbeam. He reclaims his seat in the bean bag and turns his attention to the next chapter of Campbell's book.

The silver spoon sometimes skips on the surface, but mostly stays submerged. Nobody pays much attention to it until hours later when Ian notices a quick jerk on the end of the rod.

"Captain Ted, something big just struck at your lure."

He unties his pole and reels the line in. Both hooks on his silver spoon are bent straight.

"That one got away with a sore lip." Ted takes the lure off the leader and fastens another one. "Good thing, we never could have landed it in the boat anyway."

Maybe an hour later, sitting cross-legged on the bench mesmerized watching *Toucan's* wake, I see a big splash. "Ted, you've got a fish on the hook this time!"

He puts his book down and unties the pole again from the crossbeam. "Oh boy!" he says and begins to reel the fish in.

I spring to my feet and search the bench lockers for the landing net and the gaff hook.

Ted pulls back on the rod. "It's not puttin' up much of a fight."

Joni grabs her camera and sits at the table ready to capture the action. "Ah, the poor thing's probably tired of fighting."

As the skipper reels the fish closer, it jumps again, and we see its size. The sound of the splash fades away.

Ian has the gaff and holds it ready. "It's a beauty, ay cap'n?"

Ted grits his teeth and reels it in the rest of the way, close to the stern. "Looks like a skipjack tuna." He looks up at Ian. "Careful, this is when they often get away."

Ian inserts the gaff into the fish's gill, lifts the nearly dead tuna out of the water, and lands it on the transom deck. Ted bashes it hard on the head a couple of times with a ball-peen hammer to knock it out and retrieves his silver spoon.

He glances over at me. "The Berkley scale should be under the chart table."

I grab the scale and attach it to the end of the gaff hook. Ted keeps his hand tight on the tail fin without applying any downward pressure. The needle points to twenty-two pounds.

Joni snaps the shutter on her Instamatic. "You gotta clean it good before it comes into the galley."

Ted prepares the tuna and delivers two sizable fillets ready to cook. Joni turns on the gas burner, opens the window to create a cross breeze, and goes to work. She has about an hour before sunset.

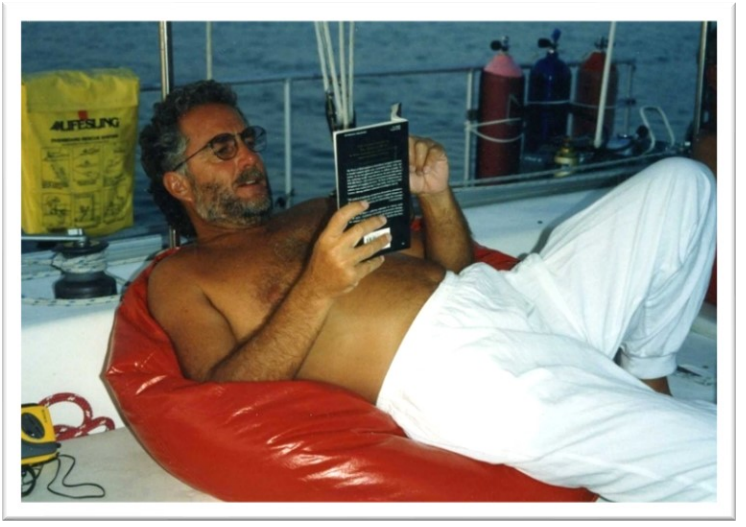
All the guys agree that the best part of each day occurs at dinnertime, no question about it. Every single day Joni prepares a dinner worth waiting for, but when she serves fresh tuna steaks, pan-fried in butter with garlic and chives, we know it couldn't get any better.

The last bottle of wine, the cork goes pop.
Four tumblers filled, didn't spill a drop.
Fricke lifts his up, "Here's to the cook."
Then Joni says, "To the 'jack on the hook."

About the Author

Doug Fricke has sailed on a wide variety of boats, both as crew and as skipper. He learned in the mid-1970s with his Hobie Cat off the beaches of Florida. In the early '80s he upgraded to a Stiletto catamaran and by the mid-80s became the second owner of a 38' Newick Native trimaran custom-built by Concordia Yachts.

Along the way, he obtained a U.S. Coast Guard captain's license for chartering, organized regattas in Tampa Bay, acted as committee chairman for the Stiletto Nationals in Sarasota, and later worked as a part-time instructor with the Offshore Sailing School in Jersey City.



The author on board *Toucan* in the Florida Keys, April 1994.